

SPEECH MAKERS BIBLE

Write and deliver
speeches that hit the mark

Kevin Balshaw

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To the world's messengers,
many of them posthumously.

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Preface

The genesis for this book goes back to my early teenage years in the far west of Victoria on the southern corner of Australia when a teacher/mentor at the rough and tumble Casterton High School, a country version of Collingwood Grammar as I regarded it, persuaded me to give up my nights by a kerosene lamp with soft-cover westerns and detective stories and begin a lifetime's interest in the pages of history's finest literature.

It was not long before I was committed to a path in life far outside the mould of the times and the place of my upbringing, where in general the options were to work on a farm, shear sheep, repair cars, join the council road gang leaning on their shovels or, at the higher end of life's aspirations, balance the day's takings in the local bank. Reading set off a creative itch that I came to realise had been inherently vested in me. I would write—and have done ever since.

An amateur and amateurish period of writing through my school years—the gospels phase—accounted for the fact that English was the only subject I passed in the final year. After that and a brief itinerant existence, mostly writing poetry in coffee shops in Melbourne and Adelaide, I secured a cadetship in journalism at the Hamilton Spectator, back in my home territory. The experience through my early years there was a blunt and unforgiving initiation from which I have to thank a number of gifted mentors, mainly latter day itinerants on the country news circuit, for teaching me to write tight news copy and translate that style into more creative feature writing. It also led to my elevation at age 23 to the position of editor.

I worked more than twenty years in the media—a mix of print, radio and television—before reaching what might be termed revelations, a change of direction into feeding and managing the media, managing web sites and speechwriting for politicians. For this transition that began one of the most interesting, challenging and pressure-charged times in my life, I have to thank Tom Wallace, former conservative National Party member for Gippsland South in the Victorian Parliament. Tom engaged me part-time to write his media releases and speeches. Subsequently Peter McGauran, who went on to be a minister in the Howard Government, used my services, as did the State Upper House member for Gippsland, Peter Hall.

Working for them led in 1990 to an appointment as press secretary and speechwriter to the Victorian National Party leader, Pat McNamara. Through two grinding years in opposition, which I

wouldn't wish on anyone although it was probably a good apprenticeship, I came increasingly under the attention of the Nationals' senior coalition partner, the Liberals. As it became clear Victoria's first woman Premier, Joan Kirner, was about to call an election in the spring of 1992, I was drafted to join the Liberals' media team, which made three of us. The story that leader Jeff Kennett and his people plied to the Nationals was that they wanted a cohesive Coalition media unit covering both parties for the campaign. But from that point on, I was firmly entrenched with the Liberal Party.

Kennett came to me halfway through the campaign and said, 'Pat is going to offer you a job in government as a tourism adviser, but the offer is open if you want to be one of my press secretaries. Give me an answer by tomorrow.' There's no question, I told him on the spot, I'll take it.

Through his seven-year reign as Premier, I was his keynote speechwriter, penned his suggested Preamble to the Australian Constitution during the republic debate, vetted most of the other speeches prepared for him by advisers, and oversaw whole-of-government communications, the transformation to online government and the development and management of government web sites.

I was the anchor for writing the campaign launch speeches for Kennett at elections in 1992, 1996 and 1999, co-ordinated policy development for the 1996 and 1999 elections, wrote speeches for formal openings of the Parliament for Governors Richard McGarvie and Mr Justice Sir James Gobbo, and through the 1999 election

project managed the infamous jeff.com.au web site, which for the best part of a decade retained the mantle as the most successful political site in the history of the Net in Australia.

On 19 October 1999, after a month with the result in the balance, Kennett conceded defeat in an election he had been expected to win by a country mile. The carnival was over. From the next day, I was working with a number of corporate clients I had lined up—a free agent writing speeches for company leaders including Wayne Bos, then head of the Sausage dot com group, Dr Ziggy Switkowski and his management team at Telstra, Malcolm Broomhead, first at mining house North Ltd and later at Orica Australia, Marcia Coleman as chairman of the national co-ordinating body for organ and tissue donation, Australians Donate, the peak pharmaceutical industry body, the Australian Davos Connection, for leading figures (who should remain nameless) on both sides of the political fence, and, in a rare excursion into the sporting world, for Alicia Molik's first public appearance following the 2005 Australian Tennis Open.

This combined with corporate affairs, media relations, marketing plans and web site projects for corporates, government departments and non-government organisations.

My life as a free agent continues—a blend of work/lifestyle that depends on my attitude and initiative and ideas and the vicissitudes of the market, of holding to the independence it provides and waking in a cold sweat in the middle of the night in the lean months. Whatever happens next, the devil may care. I am indebted to my elder daughter, Angela, for a saying that has become

integral to my philosophy: We'll burn that bridge when we come to it!

From this background, my guide to speechwriting is set in the creative arena of contemporary Australia, with ample historical references to back it, and derives from a lifetime devoted to writing, and writing the spoken word.

Kevin Balshaw

1. The world's a stage

Speechwriting has an air of mystery about it—the kind of thing someone else does, but you don't quite know how, or how they can make it fit together so that the end result is coherent, effective and almost seem like it might have been easy. Even more daunting can be the combined task of writing and delivering your own speech. For most people, public speaking is one of their greatest fears, out on the edge of unknowing like a first-time parachutist.

But if you've sat through a speech that worked well and seemed like it was easy, as if it was a wordsmith's gem and the speaker made it sound like it was second nature to them, that is precisely the destination we're going to arrive at. Dispel the fears, set out a practical, step-by-step guide that makes it straightforward and easy, and give you the confidence to write and, if you're the one in

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the frontline, deliver a good speech that will have people talking about it and what an engaging public performer you are.

I have been doing this for a quarter century. I must admit trepidation still surfaces at the outset when a speech assignment comes in. But that ends immediately the task is assessed and there is an appreciation of what lies ahead, the deadlines and how it is to be handled. Then the excitement of the chase—the challenge—takes over. It becomes a matter of setting out on a new adventure, often pioneering unknown territory, gaining a commanding knowledge in fields that may never have been contemplated. And by applying a sequential, planned approach, it builds with surety towards an end result you can be confident will work, and work well.

If it is the case that stratospheric anxiety levels are your initial reaction, be comforted that you are not on your own. Aside from a lifetime's writing and my specific experience at handling speeches, I continue to be sought out as a speechwriter to company executives and the like for two basic reasons. The lesser is that the internal corporate affairs units are generally preoccupied with the day's immediate priorities—either in defensive or crisis mode trying to get their organisation out of a deep hole that a media report or political comment has put it in, and it will be exactly the same tomorrow and the day after and ... It's much like the concept of the paperless office, an idea filled with good intentions, and that is as far as it goes. The main thing, though, is the sheer terror that strikes in the ranks of corporate affairs when the chief strides from his office, six-shooters strapped on, saying he has accepted a keynote speech engagement and he wants it to be a humdinger. You see, it happens

even at high level in the professional environment. The easiest solution for them is to say we have an expert out there, hand it on to him. Corporate affairs, along with many other people in the organisation, become the experts only when the draft is in and they can pick it to pieces and seek to put their territorial mark on it.

As the Beatles put it, for people right across the scale there will be an answer. Just let it be.

Convince yourself first

BASICALLY, WE NEED to be convinced and convincing—to ourselves and others. There is a need to build confidence, not only for the writer but the person who is to deliver the speech, sometimes one and the same person. Beware that in the absence of thorough, methodical planning you run a real risk of getting lost in a maze of stumbling rhetoric and end up unable to present a convincing case and relate a compelling story.

In the course of this exercise, we will show you how to resolve the range of issues that are common to speechwriting. One is a lack of access to a busy executive, which means often the writer has to work in isolation from the speaker. There is a need to get to know them in other ways and second guess them in the context of their speaking engagement. Conflicting currents often emerge within an organisation over what the speech should say, what it should not say. Suddenly everyone is an expert speechwriter. The real writer needs to take ownership and not let it get lost and diffused in an internal committee process—and often that takes a measure of raw

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courage. These internal processes will be pushing for the speech to echo the corporate mantras and brand themes, use catch-terms and euphemisms and convey the message in language that either saps it of meaning or veils the real intent, all of which should be resisted. Most important for the quality of the end result is that the writer is able to exercise a mastery of the language, looking critically and analytically at the written word on the page and being able to perceive how it will resonate in the delivery—the written spoken word.

The issues I have set out always have to be taken into account, but they are by no means insurmountable barriers. These are the peripherals we deal with: the speech is the big picture and we stick with it.

Writing speeches relies on a range of talents and requires flexibility—an innate deftness in developing imagery and ideas—to fit an intellectual and creative exercise to a specific occasion. To the promise that there will be an answer, there is. It calls for thorough preparation and planning, to know where the traps are set and how not to get caught in them, to follow the plan to its logical conclusion, and throughout to apply the faculties of imagination and creativity that are essential to make it live and capture an audience's attention.

This guide will give everyone who has to utter a word in a formal public situation an insight into the fact that the world's a stage and if they happen to occupy centre stage they can handle it in style.

What you will discover from this guide is a case that argues the importance of speeches in communication, provides an extensive range of examples and case studies and a step-by-step guide to the result you want ... without ever having to strap on a parachute:

- The critical role of the speech in the communication function of all kinds of organisations, along with some inspiration that will give you the confidence to develop a speech and, if it is your lot, deliver it;
- Speeches that hit the mark—the elements of a great speech, along with examples of the best and the worst from both earlier and modern times and some notable clangers that will demonstrate what to avoid;
- Speech formats from full text to short-handed dot points, and an evaluation of the use and over-use of Powerpoint slides;
- The importance of establishing the context of the speech;
- Knowing your speaker;
- Knowing your subject, incorporating the most effective research methods;
- Planning the structure of the speech and writing it;
- Case studies and examples—many of them from way out of the normal mould, based on my judgment, and many that derive from my direct experience;
- The process of speech development step by step from assignment to final approval;

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- Setting out promotional and media strategies to get maximum value from an address;
- Final assessment—feedback and evaluation to put the writer and presenter in better tune for next time; and
- A guide to achieving the most effective delivery with ease and confidence.

Although I began writing political speeches in the early 1980s, the real origin of my experience on a higher plane dates from 1992 when I started work as the writer in newly-elected Victorian Premier Jeff Kennett's political office. They dubbed me with one of those titles that were commonly used in the medieval royal courts—a lordly title, but one that designates the functionary's place in the scheme of things. Accordingly, take this as a lesson from the scribe of the Court of Kennett (and, before and since then, of many other places and people), dignified as *The Lord of the Quill*.